“BUILD BACK BETTER”: THE 2004 INDIAN OCEAN TSUNAMI AND SRI LANKA’S FISHING COMMUNITIES
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Abstract

The 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami did horrendous damage to the fishing communities of the eastern and southern coasts of Sri Lanka. The tsunami killed tens of thousands of people, injured and displaced hundreds of thousands more, degraded and devastated infrastructure, and all but wiped out many communities dependent on subsistence fishing, or fisherfolk. The damage done by the tsunami was exacerbated by several factors. The disaster was made worse by natural vulnerabilities that existed among the fisherfolk, as well as a poor government response and pre-existing conflicts that were aggravated or reignited by the tsunami.
The 2004 Indian Ocean Tsunami, also known as the Sumatra–Andaman tsunami, was one of the worst natural disasters of the decade (Karan 1). It killed over 200 000 people and left over 1 million displaced, homeless and without a livelihood (Karan 1). Sri Lanka, especially its southern and eastern coast, was one of the most severely affected countries\(^1\) (Karan 7). Its waves hit Sri Lanka within two hours, with its wave height peaking at about nine meters (Karan 9).

The 2005 tsunami impacted most of Sri Lanka’s coastal areas, with all but the northwestern coastline being hit by the waves\(^2\). However, the tsunami, due to its origin near Sumatra and the north-south slide of the plates, hit the southern and eastern coasts of Sri Lanka first and hardest\(^3\). These areas were the areas directly in the path of the tsunami, were also the most vulnerable. Sri Lanka’s Eastern Province had been a major battleground in the 21-year long civil war between the Sri Lankan government and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), a Tamil separatist rebel group (Klein 386). Due to this, it was already devastated by conflict. There was a lack of government control over much of the territory up until February 2002, when a temporary ceasefire was signed,

\(^1\) See Figure 1
\(^2\) See Figure 8
\(^3\) See Figures 2 and 3
and there was still significant mistrust between the two sides (Klein 386). This would complicate provision of aid and hamper reconstruction. The Southern Province was much less war-torn, but was economically underdeveloped in comparison to the industrialized western coast ("Goals: Southern Provincial Council"). Both of these provinces were therefore much more vulnerable to the devastation caused by the tsunami.

The Sri Lankans most heavily affected by the tsunami were the fisherfolk of the southern and eastern coasts. These villagers based their livelihoods on subsistence and small-scale commercial fishing, and generally lived directly on the beach, meters away from the oncoming wave (Klein 386). This proximity to the ocean made them much more vulnerable. The fisherfolk, even before the disaster, were extremely impoverished and were often marginalized by the government due to conflict between fisherfolk and the economically important hotel and tourism industry, especially on the eastern coast (Klein 387). The hotel and tourism industry wanted the beaches to be cleared of “economically unproductive” fishing communities to make way for hotels and tourist beaches. This conflict led to many incidents of confrontation, in which the government often supported the hotel owners (Klein 387). This made the fisherfolk even more vulnerable to the tsunami, and would affect reconstruction efforts after the disaster.
The tsunami hit Sri Lanka’s southern and eastern coasts hard. Only an hour and a half after the earthquake, the tsunami hit Sri Lanka, engulfing the town of Kalmunai (Gunatillake 286). The majority of the Batticaloa district in the Eastern province was inundated (Gunatillake 286). The wave was so powerful that in many places it permanently altered the coastline⁴ (Karan 9). Of the 35 000 dead in Sri Lanka, over 80% (27 000) of them were fisherfolk (Klein 388, Gunatillake 289). In heavily affected towns such as Arugam Bay (eastern coast) and Seenigama (southern coast), the proportion of the dead that were fisherfolk reached 98% (Klein 388). Of the 4000 fisherfolk of Arugam Bay, over 350 were killed by the wave, and the entire community lost their homes (Klein 387). There was little in the way of an early warning system, dooming many of the people in the first wave (Rodriguez et al. 168). The wave travelled as far as 1.9km inland in Seenigama village, not even one of the hardest hit areas (Yamazaki 136). The problems of the fisherfolk were exacerbated by a lack of knowledge or education about the nature of the tsunami. As Karan describes tragically,

“When the first wave receded, exposing the seafloor, large numbers of people...followed to collect seashells and shellfish. When the wave suddenly returned, they were too far out to reach safety...” (Karan 8)

⁴ See Figures 4 and 5
Another problem beyond the deaths and disappearances caused by the tsunami was the issue of mass displacement. Almost 500,000 people were displaced by the tsunami in Sri Lanka, the majority of them fisherfolk (Karan 20). Most of the displaced were left with nowhere to go but hastily established refugee camps in the interior, which soon became dangerous and disease-ridden (Klein 391, 398). These camps, far from the ocean and filled predominately with people who relied on the ocean for their livelihood, would prolong and exacerbate the already inadequate reconstruction projects.

Sri Lanka’s fishing communities’ problems of reconstruction were exacerbated by the destruction of their property and livelihoods. The tsunami had destroyed the vast majority of their homes, sweeping the poorly built huts out to sea (Rodriguez et al. 169). Over 44% of all damaged homes were completely destroyed, and 72% of the remaining homes were left inhabitable (Gunatillake 288). As well, the lightweight, generally unanchored fishing boats, usually launched directly off the beach, were damaged and either driven far onto shore or swept out to sea (Rodriguez et al. 169, Gunatillake 289). Combined with their displacement from the coast, and thus their inability to fish, the fisherfolks’ loss of property exacerbated the already dire humanitarian crisis unfolding along the coast (Klein 389). Without a means of feeding

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5 See Figure 6
themselves without food aid (only obtainable in the interior camps) and no means of making money, the fisherfolk were stuck between living in squalor in refugee camps and starving on the beach (Klein 398). Many fisherfolk who owned their land were coerced into selling it in the wake of the disaster for far under its market value in order to survive (Cohen 232).

In addition to the damage sustained by the fishing communities themselves, the disaster seriously damaged the Southern and Eastern Provinces’ coastal infrastructure. In all of Sri Lanka, a developing country, 185 schools were wrecked (Gunatillake 288) and an estimated 60,000 wells were inundated (Ballantyne 547). Economically vital infrastructure suffered particularly badly. Out of only 14 major harbors on the island, 12 of them were completely destroyed by the tsunami (Gunatillake 289). 5% of the national road network and 2% of the provincial road networks were severely affected by the tsunami. However, the tsunami, which swept far up rivers and inundated low–lying land specifically while leaving the large interior road network untouched, meant that coastal roads and bridges suffered far more than the raw statistics suggest (Gunatillake 289). These coastal roads were essential in providing aid to the displaced people of the southern and eastern coasts, but they were wiped out. This made it even more difficult to provide aid, and would cause significant misery, as well as hamper later reconstruction efforts (Gunatillake 290).
The government’s response to the tsunami had three major parts. The first was to provide immediate humanitarian aid to the population, the second was to guarantee longer-term necessities such as healthcare and permanent housing, and the third was to begin the process of reconstruction (Samaratunge et. al. 688–689). However, the response to the tsunami was plagued with problems. Poor and damaged infrastructure (both physical and political) and social conflict over which groups would receive the spoils of the reconstruction would complicate and hamper response and reconstruction.

Damaged infrastructure, as already discussed, would hamper the provision of aid. Destroyed roads and rail lines and devastated harbors would slow down the reconstruction process (Gunatillake 287–291). Donated humanitarian aid and supplies for reconstruction were bottled up in damaged and overwhelmed ports, and neither the government or NGOs had any way of moving the supplies in adequate amounts to the interior (Samaratunge et. al. 690). This already existing problem of inadequate physical infrastructure was exacerbated by inadequate governmental infrastructure. Local, state and national governments, private businesses, NGOs and the powerful Task Force to Rebuild the Nation (a temporary government body) had poor co-ordination with each other. They all competed for the limited infrastructural resources that existed, causing bottlenecks, wasted supplies, conflict and general
inefficiency (Samaratunge et al. 691). This in turn gave rise to increasing
amounts of corruption, reaching to the highest levels of government
(Samaratunge et al. 687). For example, while homes across the nation
remained in rubble, the electoral district of Sri Lanka’s president had a
“miraculous 173 percent of [its] homes [rebuilt]” (Klein 404).

The response to the tsunami was also hampered by ongoing social
crime conflict over who would receive the spoils of the reconstruction.
Surprisingly, the civil war that had wracked Sri Lanka for over 20 years,
between the government and the LTTE, initially proved not to be a
significant problem. Not only had a shaky ceasefire signed in 2002 held
up, but also local conflicts had all but evaporated as the necessity of
survival overtook ethnic hatred (Klein 390). Neighbors helped one
another in outbursts of generosity and kindness that made it seem as
though

“…this invasion of salt water and rubble was so humblingly
powerful that, in addition to grinding up homes and buckling
highways, it also scrubbed away intractable hatreds, blood feuds
and the tally of who last killed whom (Klein 390).

However, the LTTE would later become more of a problem, as the
government seemed to be favoring ethnic majority Sinhalese over the
Tamils or Muslims in the reconstruction process (Klein 403). In July 2006,
the LTTE declared the ceasefire over and began combat operations again
(Klein 404), which further exacerbated an already devastating humanitarian situation\(^6\).

Another problematic conflict during the reconstruction process was between the fisherfolk of all ethnicities and the tourism industry. For years before the tsunami struck, the tourism industry had been battling fishing communities over the unexploited beaches of Sri Lanka (Klein 386). The fisherfolk, who had lived on the beaches for a very long time, had refused offers to sell their land and had entered into sometimes-violent confrontations with the tourism industry and their government supporters (Klein 385–387). Before the tsunami, however, the two sides had roughly equal strength, and the situation had stabilized (Klein 387).

After the tsunami, though, the tourism industry had significantly more power. Half of the committee members of the Task Force to Rebuild the Nation had business interests in the tourism industry; this gave them both the incentive and the power to shift control over the beaches from the fisherfolk to the resorts (Klein 396). This manifested itself in the form of a new safety rule that barred reconstruction within 200 meters of the tsunami’s high-water mark, effectively barring the fisherfolk from rebuilding their homes (Klein 388)\(^7\). However, new tourist development

\(^6\) See Figure 10

\(^7\) See Figure 9
was exempted from this rule, making the rule’s actual purpose of banishing the fisherfolk from the beaches strikingly clear (Klein 388–391, 397). This would cause conflict down the line, as desperate fisherfolk would attempt to return to the beaches from the refugee camps in which they had been living (Klein 389, 402). While the redevelopment plans were eventually blocked after massive protests, the attempt to “build back better” (Klein 386) and clear the fisherfolk off the beaches would create lasting conflict and fetter the return to normalcy for the fisherfolk (Cohen 324).

One of the most troubling aspects of the tsunami’s devastation was the exuberance that many in the business community seemed to greet the disaster with. While there was mourning at the terrible loss of life, there was significant excitement among people with economic interest in seeing the beaches cleared of fisherfolk. Almost immediately after the tsunami, business interests began to declare that Sri Lanka would “build back better” (Klein 386) by replacing indigenous fisherfolk with expensive tourist hotels, and that “the beach will be clean” (Klein 390), an implicit threat against those people who wished to return. The fact that many saw the tsunami as more of an opportunity than a tragedy and exploited the shocked and scattered fisherfolk for monetary benefit is truly heinous.
Another troubling aspect is that the government, through corruption and ineptitude, shirked its responsibility to its people before and after the wave hit. Sri Lanka’s people were not taught the correct methods of responding to tsunamis, made clear by the deaths of those people who wandered onto the exposed beach after the first wave (Karan 8). Immediately after the disaster, the government made an effort to aid its people, however its efforts were often inadequate, leaving its people stuck in squalid, dangerous camps (Klein 391, 398). Corruption played another role in the failures of the Sri Lankan government (Samaratunge et. al. 691). Finally, the government often supported the blatant land grab by the tourism industry, hurting the interests of its people for the benefit of powerful businesses (Klein 394).

A more inspiring aspect of the disaster was how the various ethnic groups managed to put aside their hatreds in order to rebuild, even as the government failed to provide for them in a time of need, and they were under attack from powerful outside forces (Klein 390). This demonstrates the humanity of the people involved in a terrible crisis, and how adversity brings people together.

In conclusion, the damage to Sri Lanka’s fishing communities caused by the tsunami was significant. Coastal communities were all but wiped out, with tens of thousands of dead. The harbors, roads and fishing boats necessary to maintain their livelihoods were destroyed.
Hundreds of thousands were displaced to the interior. The government’s efforts did some good, but were hampered by conflict, ineptitude and corruption. Finally, while the fisherfolk were desperately hanging on to their very existence, powerful business interests were taking their land and making it impossible for the fisherfolk to rebuild their lives as they had been. The tsunami would not only devastate the fisherfolk in the short run, but in the long run as well.
Figures:

Figure 1: Epicenter of the 2004 Indian Ocean earthquake and tsunami, and surrounding countries. The most severely affected countries were Indonesia, Sri Lanka, India and Thailand (Inoue et. al. 396)
Figure 2: It is clear that the south and east coast towns, relative to their populations, were the hardest hit (Inoue et. al. 396).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Province</th>
<th>District</th>
<th>Deaths</th>
<th>Missing people</th>
<th>Completely damaged houses</th>
<th>Partially damaged houses</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Northern</td>
<td>Jaffna</td>
<td>2,640</td>
<td>540</td>
<td>6,084</td>
<td>1,114</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Killinochchi</td>
<td>560</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1,250</td>
<td>4,250</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mullativu</td>
<td>3,000</td>
<td>552</td>
<td>3,400</td>
<td>600</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eastern</td>
<td>Trincomalee</td>
<td>1,078</td>
<td>337</td>
<td>5,974</td>
<td>10,394</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Batticaloa</td>
<td>2,840</td>
<td>1,033</td>
<td>15,939</td>
<td>5,665</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Ampara</td>
<td>10,436</td>
<td>876</td>
<td>29,077</td>
<td>-</td>
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<tr>
<td>Southern</td>
<td>Hambantota</td>
<td>4,500</td>
<td>963</td>
<td>2,303</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Matara</td>
<td>1,342</td>
<td>613</td>
<td>2,362</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Galle</td>
<td>4,216</td>
<td>554</td>
<td>5,525</td>
<td>5,966</td>
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<tr>
<td>Western</td>
<td>Kalutara</td>
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<td>148</td>
<td>2,572</td>
<td>2,930</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Gampaha</td>
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<td>5</td>
<td>292</td>
<td>307</td>
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<td>North Western</td>
<td>Puttalam</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td></td>
<td>30,957</td>
<td>5,637</td>
<td>78,199</td>
<td>40,911</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Data as at 23/01/05 (National Disaster Management Center, 2005).
Figure 3: Sri Lankan cities severely affected by the tsunami, visited by researchers from December 30, 2004 – January 4, 2005 to survey the damage. Seenigama is located just east of Matara. These were not the only cities affected; many towns in the far north of the country, such as Jaffna, were heavily damaged, but researchers were barred entry to the areas by the LTTE (Inoue et. al. 396).
Figure 4: Coastline of the city of Kalutara on the southwestern coast of Sri Lanka before the tsunami (Stokke 513)

Figure 5: Coastline of the city of Kalutara on the southwestern coast of Sri Lanka after the tsunami. The significant level of destruction and flooding is apparent, even in one of the more prepared and more lightly hit areas (Stokke 513).
Figure 6: A scene of devastation in the Eastern Province of Sri Lanka. It is clear that the wave destroyed the fragile homes on the beach, and badly damaged a fishing boat, sweeping it up onto the beach (http://www.unicef.org/emerg/disasterinasia/index_26558.html)

Figure 7: Fisherfolk displaced from their homes. They would not be allowed to return (Stone 503)
Figure 8: The death toll taken by the tsunami by government district (Stone 504)
Figure 9: Soldiers and workers clearing the beach of debris near Arugam Bay, on the eastern coast. The soldiers would stay to enforce the reconstruction ban, eventually followed by construction workers building hotels and beachfront resorts (Schiermeier 350).

Figure 10: A table of Sri Lankan refugees in 2009. The tsunami created a large number of internally displaced people (IDPs), many of whom have still not returned home. It also did much to re-ignite the Sri Lankan Civil War, which created large internal refugee problems (2011 UNHCR Country Operations Profile – Sri Lanka).
Works Cited


